

Orthodoxy in Scandinavia

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Traditional Scandinavian stave church: The Hopperstad Stave Church, in the village of Vikøyri in Vik Municipality in Vestland county, Norway. The stave church is assumed to have been built around the year 1130 and still stands at its original location.

Introduction

The area collectively designated as Scandinavia consists of the present-day countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Sometimes also: Åland, Faroe Islands, Finland, and Iceland). The designation Scandinavia may come from the province of Scania in southern Sweden; at any rate, the term for the region is attested as early as Pliny's Natural History. Deep and ancient ties of history, culture, and language bind these lands.

For many centuries after the time of Christ and the establishment of His Church, and even after the Christianization of much of Western Europe, the Scandinavian lands remained inveterately pagan. The light of Christ was long in penetrating into these dark and distant northerly places. Norse mythology, with its violent and bloody pantheon and shamanistic ritual practices, held sway for many ages. With the initiation of the period of the great Viking raids beginning in the late 8th century, though, the ancient Scandinavian people began to make contact with Christian communities and cultures. Even if said contact occurred in the context of violent raids and often murderous plundering, nevertheless, a seed of exposure at least was planted. But it would take the monumental labours of a pair of fearless missionaries to bring the light of the Orthodox Gospel of Christ to these lands. It is with them that the Christian story of Scandinavia properly begins.

1. Missionaries and Enlighteners:

St. Ansgar of Hamburg (†865)

St. Sigfrid of Växjö (†1050)



The evangelization of the Nordic lands, as we have said, was a comparatively late phenomenon compared to the rest of Western Europe. It was largely initiated by one man, who most certainly ranks among the great missionary saints in the history of the Church. This was St. Ansgar of Hamburg and Bremen, and our discussion of Orthodoxy in the Nordic lands begins, appropriately, with him.

St. Ansgar was born in Amiens in Gaul (present-day France) in 801 into a family of the Frankish nobility. From a tender age—and all throughout his life—he was given to visions, which often guided and inspired him.

Once, as a young boy, he beheld a vision of his recently deceased mother walking in a company with the Mother of God, which induced him to abandon childish frivolity and adhere to a serious and sober course of life.

Raised in monasticism Corbey Abbey, he was later part of a small group sent to establish the monastery of New Corbey in Westphalia, northwestern Germany. There, his principal duties consisted of teaching in the school and delivering homilies.

The work for which St. Ansgar is best remembered and for which he bears the title “Apostle of the North” is his pioneering missionary efforts in Denmark and Sweden. Venturing north first to Denmark, he established a school for boys. However, his first missionary effort in that land was to prove short-lived, and he was compelled to leave and return to Germany. Almost immediately afterwards, he was invited to missionize Sweden, which commission he readily accepted. There, he became the first person ever to preach the Gospel of Christ in that land. Gradually, he began winning converts and establishing churches.



St. Ansgar preaching the Gospel with Friar Witmar.

Appointed to the Archbishopric of Hamburg, from which post he could pursue his mission to the northern lands, St. Ansgar travelled to Rome, where the pope formally tasked him with evangelizing the pagan nations of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. He continued preaching and building churches and monasteries, facing grave dangers and frequent setbacks. An especially severe crisis occurred when pagan Danes sacked his see of Hamburg. His efforts were bolstered, however, when he was given the archbishopric of Bremen in addition to Hamburg after the see had become vacant, giving him a broader base for his missionary activities.

St. Ansgar reposed peacefully of natural causes in 865, just one day after the Feast of the Meeting of the Lord. Ever since a visionary experience from his youth that had seemed to summon him to the path of martyrdom, he had yearned with all his soul for a martyr's end. Though such a death was not granted him in the literal sense, his life of tireless labour, constant danger, suffering, and reversals constituted a prolonged daily martyrdom. St. Ansgar gave all of himself to bring the light of Christ to distant peoples immured in pagan darkness. Despite his hardships and limited means, he was a generous almsgiver. He was also a severe ascetic who wore hairshirts and practiced a strict rule of discipline in all aspects of his daily life. Even during his lifetime, he worked numerous miracles; when this was once remarked upon, the saint modestly insisted that he wished only that by a miracle, he might himself become a good man.

A Life of St. Ansgar, the [*Vita Ansgarii*](#), was written by his disciple and successor to the Hamburg-Bremen Archbishopric, St. Rimbert (†888).

Despite the heroic nature of St. Ansgar's labours, the pervasively entrenched paganism of the territories he evangelized meant that many of his gains were short-lived. Before long, these newly enlightened areas relapsed into their former pagan darkness. But the seeds he planted would prove fruitful and come to greater fruition under another enlightener some years later: St. Sigfrid of Växjö.



Icon of St. Sigfrid of Sweden

St. Sigfrid is, after St. Ansgar, the second enlightener of the Nordic lands. In many ways, his mission was to restore and consolidate St. Ansgar's work, as many of the areas once converted by St. Ansgar had relapsed to paganism in the intervening two centuries. He thus built upon and rendered permanent the achievements of his great predecessor.

St. Sigfrid was born in Glastonbury, England's Holy Land, sometime in the latter half of the 10th century. St. Alphege of Canterbury (†1012) is said to have converted him. Some sources on his life state that he became, at least briefly, Archbishop of York.

When the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason¹, who had been brought to faith in Christ by the holy hermit St. Lide (comm. Aug. 8th) on the Scilly Isles off

southern Britain, requested missionaries to return with him to Norway to re-evangelize his land, the English King Aethelred appointed Sigfrid to lead the mission. The holy man took up this summons with deep and laudable zeal. The saint's period of activity in Norway was eventful. He confronted a feared and powerful sorcerer, miraculously calming a storm which the latter had stirred up against him. He also discovered the incorrupt relics of St. Sunniva (see below) and established her veneration. Later, he worked alongside Olaf Tryggvason's successor, King St. Olaf (Haraldsson; see below) in the evangelization of Norway.

When Sweden's king, also named Olaf, petitioned the English king for Christian missionaries to enlighten his land, St. Sigfrid took up the call. Here, he would labour to the end of his life and accomplish his greatest work. In response to an angelic vision, he set up a cross and built a church in Växjö, whose locale would thenceforth serve as the base of his activities.

Before long, his grace-filled preaching and miracles converted twelve chiefs of the Goths, which resulted in a wave of conversions. Soon afterward, the king himself, along with his entire court and family, also received baptism. The king, Olaf the Swede, is now numbered among the saints, as is his daughter Ingegerd, better known as the holy princess St. Anna of Novgorod (see below in re: both Sts. Olaf and Anna).

St. Sigfrid was capably assisted in his missionary labours by his three nephews: The priest Unaman, the deacon Sunaman, and the sub-deacon Winaman. Leaving them behind in Växjö on one occasion while he travelled to preach in Denmark, he returned to find that a gang of pagans had brutally martyred them and ransacked the church. At his prayers, the location of his nephew's holy relics was miraculously disclosed to him. Recovering their severed heads from the bottom of the lake into which they had been cast, the heads were vouchsafed the power of speech and gave the names of their murderers. However, when the king proposed to execute the guilty, St. Sigfrid pleaded on their behalf, sparing their lives. Despite his impoverished situation, the holy man also declined to accept the weregild, or blood money that had been extracted from them.

St. Sigfrid continued his apostolic labours in Sweden into great old age and reposed in peace. His relics were placed in the church in Växjö and were immediately glorified by miracles.

There are three disciples of St. Sigfrid worthy of mention here. These brave and dedicated men followed in his footsteps and continued his apostolic labours, spreading the Gospel to previously unenlightened areas of Sweden. While they each reposed sometime after the Schism of the West from the Orthodox Church, they were close disciples of a saint, and there seems to be some basis for veneration of them since, due to its remoteness, the effects of the Schism likely did not penetrate into Sweden or the Nordic lands generally for some time afterwards.

David of Munktorp (†1082) was an English-born Cluniac monk personally called by St. Sigfrid to assist in the evangelization of Sweden. With Eskil (†c.1080) and Botvid (†1120), he labored chiefly in the landskaps, or provinces, of Södermanland in the southeast and Västmanland in central Sweden. He is considered the apostle to Västmanland. Eskil, also of English birth, is considered the patron of Södermanland. He may have been a relative of St. Sigfrid. He was violently slain after breaking up a Norse pagan ritual; a holy spring gushed forth from a place by a mountain where his body was laid. Botvid, the last of this trio, was, unlike the others, actually of Swedish birth. But he travelled to England and was there converted to Christ, whereupon St. Sigfrid summoned him back to his native land as a missionary. Botvid accompanied David and Eskil in their itinerant preaching and suffered a violent death in the year 1120.

This concludes our look at the lives and labours of the enlighteners of the Nordic lands. Though these areas received the Gospel late and remained mired in paganism in many parts for a long time thereafter, the holy deeds and wondrous accomplishments of these great missionaries remain undimmed, summoning all of us to persist in pursuing God's will for our lives even in the face of challenges, setbacks, and even dangers. May we have their prayers!

2. Holy Martyrs

St. Sunniva of Selje (+10th c.)

St. Hallvard of Husaby (+1043)

A pair of holy martyrs, both associated with Norway, graced the Nordic lands. If, as has been truly stated, the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church, then the Church in the Nordic lands, as planted by Sts. Ansgar and Sigfrid were abundantly watered by the precious blood of these great witnesses for Christ.



St. Sunniva of Selje, patroness of Bergen

St. Sunniva of Selje Island, Norway, is the heavenly patroness of the city of Bergen.

She was an Irish princess born sometime in the 10th century. Her name, rather poetically, means “sun-gift.” It is said that, while still a youthful maiden, she fled when a pagan king, intent on taking her as his bride, invaded her kingdom. She, her sainted brother Alban, and some companions embarked on a little boat without oars, committing their destiny entirely to the will of God in much the same way as St. Brendan (†c.577) had done centuries before.

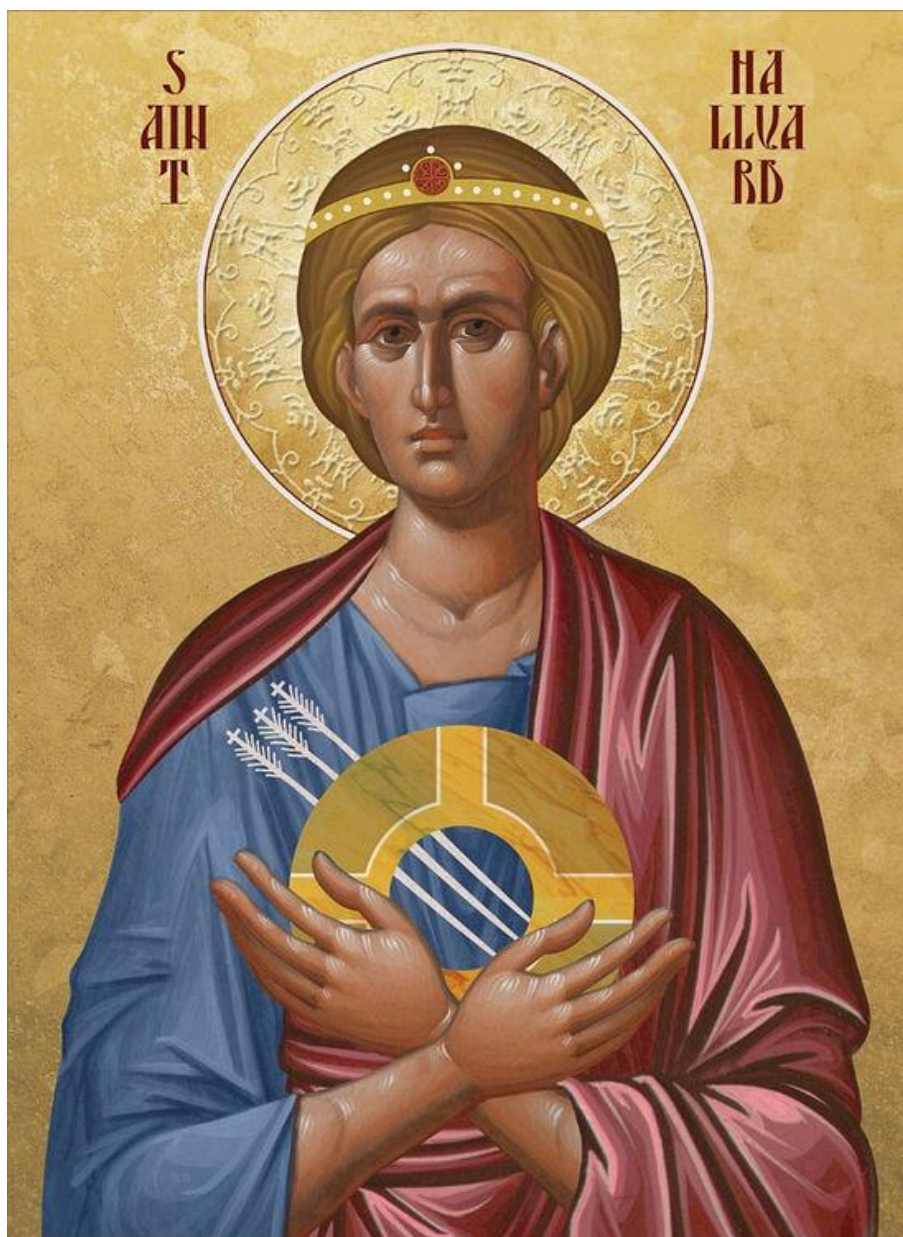
They arrived at length at the island of Selje off the Norwegian coast. There, they settled in a cave and lived monastically. But the enemy of mankind stirred up enmity against them among the local pagans. The chieftain, Haskon Jarl suspected the company of having stolen some sheep and used this pretext to make an expedition against them. Seeing their approach, and fearing that she might fall captive to and be defiled by the infidel men, St. Sunniva and her companions took refuge in their cave. There, the pious maiden prayed fervently that God would preserve her in purity. At once, the cave collapsed upon them, sending their souls to eternal glory.

But, much like the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus from ancient times, the sanctity of these holy martyrs (for such they were) could not be hidden forever. Mysterious otherworldly lights were seen by many above the cave that entombed them. Such was the attention this generated that King Olaf Tryggvason came personally to investigate. There, in the presence of the holy bishop St. Sigfrid (see above), the miraculously incorrupt holy relics of St. Sunniva were recovered.

An abbey was built on Selje near the site of St. Sunniva’s repose. In the latter part of the 12th century, her wonderworking relics, glorified by many miracles of healing, were transferred to Bergen. There, her grace-filled help was manifested numerous times. Twice, her relics halted the advance of devastating fires. Thus, forever after the holy virgin martyr Sunniva has been revered as the patron saint of that city and remains one of Norway’s most beloved saints.

Just as St. Sunniva is forever revered as the patroness of Bergen, St. Hallvard of Husaby is, to this day, considered the patron saint of Oslo, Norway. His parents were well-to-do farmers. His mother, it is believed, may have been a relative of the martyr king St. Olaf Haraldsson (below). As a young man, St. Hallvard protected a pregnant bondwoman who had sought refuge on his ship. She was being pursued by three men who had accused her of theft. The men killed her and St. Hallvard with arrows. Tying a millstone about St. Hallvard’s neck, they attempted to dispose of his body in the Drammensfjord, but miraculously it would not sink. St. Hallvard came to be

venerated as a martyr; his image even now adorns the seal of the city of Oslo, Norway's capital.



St. Hallvard of Husaby, patron of Oslo.

Through Sts. Sunniva and Hallvard, the Nordic lands (Norway in particular) are blessed with martyr saints to serve present-day Orthodox Christians in the region with examples of perseverance in service to Christ no matter the cost and to serve as powerful heavenly intercessors for the return of the Nordic lands to their Orthodox heritage.

3. Royal Nordic Saints:

St. Olaf the Swede (†1022)

St. Anna of Novgorod (†c.1050)

St. Olaf II Haraldsson, King of Norway (†1030)

This section will examine the lives of three royal saints of the Nordic lands, featuring some of the most outstanding personalities and most luminous examples of holy rulership from the entire long and venerable Orthodox history of Western Europe.

St. Olaf the Swede (Olof Skötkonung, not to be confused with either King Olaf Trygvason or St. Olaf Haraldsson of Norway) was the first Swedish king to accept Christian baptism. As such, he is a watershed figure in the nation's history and one of the spiritual fountainheads of its sacred patrimony. He is also known as Olaf Skötkonung. The various alliances, expeditions, and battles of his life before his conversion are not of direct interest to this discussion. What is significant is the fact that it was he who summoned St. Sigfrid to re-enlighten his lands, and he, in turn, eventually accepted baptism at the saint's hands. St. Olaf the Swede proved a zealous Christian and remained loyal to his newfound faith throughout the rest of his life. He desired to tear down a major pagan shrine in Uppsala, but the idolaters were still too numerous and powerful for him to accomplish his commendable desire. Instead, of necessity, he adopted a less coercive approach to conversion for his people. However, he continued to face sharp pagan opposition to his Christianization efforts and eventually suffered martyrdom at Stockholm in the year 1022.

St. Olaf's daughter, St. Anna of Novgorod, is a remarkable figure who links the Orthodox Church of the West with the Church in the East, reminding us of our common heritage.



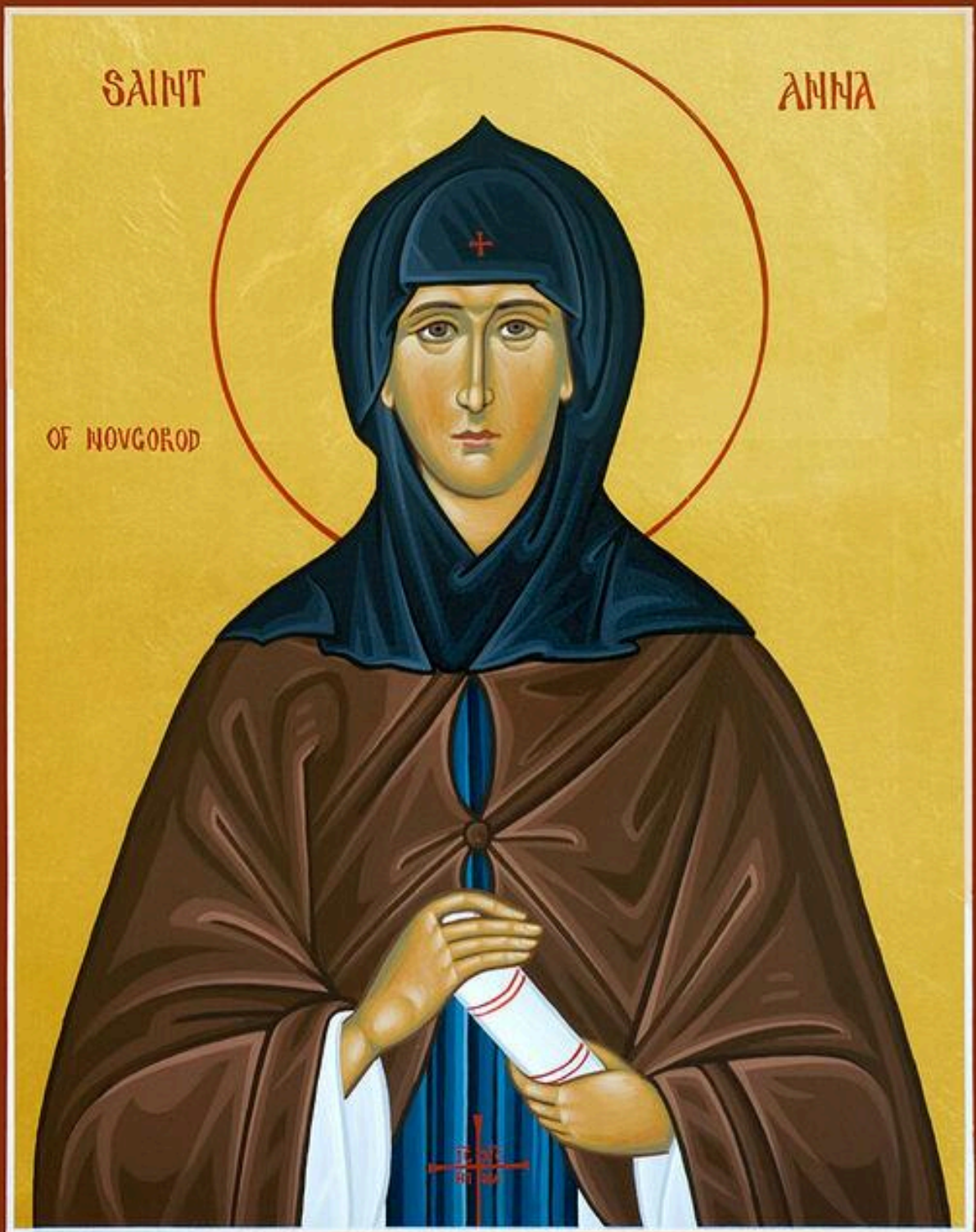
Coin minted for King Olof in Sigtuna (c. 1030 AD)



Ruins of St. Olaf's Church, Sigtuna, Sweden. originally built around the year 1100 and it consisted of a main tower, chancel and nave. Photo: [Joseph Hollick](#)

St. Anna was named Ingegerd at birth. With her father and the entire royal court, she was converted and received baptism at the hands of St. Sigfrid at Husaby.

Princess Ingegerd (who received the name Irina in baptism) was given in marriage in the year 1019 to King St. Yaroslav the Wise (†1054). She thereby became Grand Princess of Kiev. Using her considerable natural gifts and great intelligence, she played an active and influential role in her husband's administration of the kingdom's affairs. She played an especially important role in cultivating relationships with Northern Europe, her own native territory. She also received refugee royals from England, Edward and Edmund Ætheling (who were fleeing the Danish King Cnut), again demonstrating the close East-West ties of that time.



The right-believing princess, St. Anna (Ingegerd) of Novgorod

The period of her and St. Yaroslav's rule was a spiritual high point in the history of Kyivan Rus'. Among other blessings, it saw the start of Russia's great monastic tradition with the arrival from Mt. Athos of [St. Anthony, founder of the Kiev Caves Lavra](#). It was also a time of cultural achievements, political stability and consolidation. Irina herself was highly educated, being widely read in diverse subjects, including the Scandinavian sagas of her homeland.

Grand Princess Irina gave birth to ten children, all characterized by holy lives. One of them was Prince St. Vladimir of Novgorod. Later in life, Irina entered monastic life, receiving the name Anna at tonsure. She thus established a pious precedent among Russian royalty of retiring to a monastery or convent after one's time of service to the state had passed. She reposed peacefully in 1050-1051 in the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev.

In St. Anna's life, we see the universal reach of our Mother Church as if, in a nutshell. The Orthodox Church is and has always been unbounded, transcending all national and ethnic borders (without though obliterating or abolishing them). St. Anna shows this dramatically: A Swedish princess, she was evangelized by an Englishman and married into Russian royalty, in which place and role she became a saint. Truly, God is wondrous in his faithful servants, of which she is a shining example.

Another outstanding holy ruler and one of the most beloved of all Nordic saints is King St. Olaf Haraldsson of Norway. King St. Olaf is especially beloved for his martyric death on the field of battle as he fought to defend the Christian faith and for his efforts to unite the Norwegian land. Indeed, he is considered the patron saint par excellence of all of Norway.

St. Olaf received baptism in Rouen in the Normandy region of northwestern France in the year 1010, having been first exposed to the Christian faith in England. Upon ascending the throne of his native Norway, he vigorously attempted to root out the inveterate paganism of the land and firmly plant in its stead Christian piety. To this end, he imported many clerics from England, Normandy, and Germany. (Indeed, some think he has made much use of Norman clergy as they were familiar, being fellow Northmen, with Nordic culture and ways). Pagan temples and shrines were demolished and churches built in their place so that the very places where demons had long been slavishly served in wicked and profane rites resounded instead with hymns to the Lord Jesus Christ.



The holy king-martyr St. Olaf Haraldsson of Norway, patron of Scandinavia

Intense pagan opposition to his religious policies ultimately forced him into a period of exile. The holy monarch spent time in Sweden and Kyivan Rus. Returning at length with an army to try to reclaim his throne, he met his pagan opponents at Stiklestad. There, he fought valiantly but fell, a martyr for the evangelization and unification of his people. His dying words were, "God help me."

King St. Olaf's relics remained incorrupt, and miracles quickly became associated with them. His shrine in Trondheim thus became a focus of pilgrimage. This played a significant role in the Christianization of the Norwegian people. St. Olaf thereby accomplished through his death the great task he had been unable to realize during his life. He was also crucial in establishing the Christian faith in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Veneration of him soon spread throughout all of Scandinavia. He is still venerated throughout the region as one of its foremost heavenly patrons, and many locations are named for him.

These great royal saints of the Nordic lands, with their powerful and fearless witness for Christ, demonstrate a courageousness much like that of the missionaries and martyrs of the region. Indeed, that native courage in the face of any and all difficulties and dangers is one of the most salient and admirable historic Nordic traits, and it shines through in every category of the area's saints. The royal saints are brilliant examples. They forever stand as inspirations to all believers and as bold heavenly intercessors for their people to this very day.



An orthodox chapel dedicated to St. Olaf in Stiklistad, Norway.

4. Present Situation and Conclusion

Today, the Scandinavian nations rank among the most secularized places on Earth. Even by the distressingly secular standards of Western Europe in general, Scandinavia stands out as especially irreligious. This would not at present seem to bode well for the small Orthodox presence in those lands, nor does it seem particularly conducive to an eventual Orthodox re-evangelization of Scandinavia. Though nominally majority Protestant, few people are active religiously in any meaningful sense. For instance, according to Wikipedia, only about 3% of Norwegians attend services each Sunday. Many are completely without religious affiliation.

Orthodox Christians in these lands today, therefore face a number of challenges. The entire current of their surrounding culture is deeply rooted in opposition to the Christian faith and morality. Further, pressures are often applied to Orthodox parishes by governments with hostile agendas. High rents and property values place difficult financial pressures on predominantly small, cash-strapped parishes.

Much of the admittedly small Orthodox presence in Scandinavia stems from Russian and East European immigrants. However, there are growing numbers of converts. Needless to say, there remains much room for growth. Eastern Orthodox faithful account for only about 1.4% of Sweden's population, or just less than 150,000 people, to give but one example.

Regardless of how daunting the prospects may seem for Orthodoxy in Scandinavia today, it can hardly be worse than the situation that confronted St. Ansgar and, later, St. Sigfrid all those centuries ago. Great courage and perseverance were called for in the evangelization of those lands, and God raised up saints more than equal to the challenge. Through the prayers of these great saints - missionaries, martyrs, kings and queens - and through the patient and persistent faithfulness of today's Orthodox believers in Scandinavia, the light of Orthodoxy can again shine brightly over these cold northern lands. May it be blessed!